

PA Rare Bird Report

835-01-2014

Submission Date	2014-01-09 11:34:26
Observer's Name	Paul Hess
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Phone	724-226-2323
Observer's Address	Street Address: 1412 Hawthorne St. City: Natrona Heights State / Province: PA Postal / Zip Code: 15065 Country: United States
Names of additional observers	Deborah Hess
Species (Common Name)	Fox Sparrow
Species (Scientific Name)	Passerella iliaca
Subspecies (if known)	schistacea subspecies group
Number of individuals	1
Age(s) and Plumage(s) and Sex (if known)	Adult
Observation Date and Time	01-06-2014 12:20 PM
Did you submit this sighting to eBird?	Not yet (please do, eBird is great!)
County	Allegheny
Location (City, Borough, Township)	Harrison Township
Exact Site (E.g. Name of park, lake, road)	1412 Hawthorne St., Natrona Heights
GPS coordinates of sighting	40.632535,-79.724409
Habitat	on small concrete apron adjacent to my back porch in suburban yard
Distance to bird	10 feet
Viewing conditions	cloudy
Optical equipment used	Leica 8 x 32 binocular
Description	Heavy-bodied, sparrow shape; conspicuously larger and bulkier than Song Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos next to it on the apron.

Upperparts: crown, nape, back, and scapulars entirely plain dark gray; upperwing coverts, flight feathers, and tail entirely dull rufous.

Underparts: throat white with thin dark streaks; white malar stripe and prominent dark submalar stripe; breast, sides, and flanks heavily streaked with large, dark "arrowhead" spots.

From our viewing angle, about a 45-degree angle from above, and about a 20-degree angle to the side, I could not see the exact center of the breast and belly, or the undertail.

The bill was short, conical, and small relative to the overall size of its head. I did not record the color of the bill and legs.

Behavior (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing)

During our entire three minutes of observation the bird "sat" low on its tarsi on the concrete apron, which was covered by about half an inch of snow. It picked at the black oil sunflower seeds to the front and sides of its head -- only the seeds it was able to reach without moving. Its lack of movement contrasted conspicuously with the hopping and scratching activity of the sparrows and juncos around it, and I thought it might have been ill.

Separation from similar species (How you eliminated others)

The combination of entirely plain dark gray crown and back, and entirely dull rufous wings and tail separates it from other emberizids.

I cannot judge precisely which subspecies it represents within the schistacea group. The differences Pyle lists in his Identification Guide to North American Birds are so subtle, perhaps clinal, that I would only be guessing.

Discussion – anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

The instant I saw this bird, I knew that it was a "Slate-colored" schistacea-group Fox Sparrow. I grew up in Los Angeles County, California, and this bird's relative, the stephensi subspecies of the "Thick-billed" megarhyncha group was one of the most common birds in the San Gabriel Mountains where I frequently visited and camped. My familiar megarhyncha and the schistacea group are almost exactly the same in plumage but are conspicuously distinguishable by bill size. I can recall seeing only two individuals of the schistacea group, one in Colorado and one in New Mexico, but this bird's small schistacea-size bill immediately distinguished it from megarhyncha.

Are you positive of your identification ? (Why or why not)

Yes, as to the species, from my long familiarity with it in the West, and its unique appearance compared to other emberizids. As to the subspecies, I can say only that must belong to the schistacea subspecies group. My main familiarity is with the almost exactly the same-plumaged megarhyncha ("Thick-billed") subspecies in California, which lives up to the large-billed name. This bird's bill was very small.

During

None -- the time of view, about three minutes, was too short.

After

Rising and Beadle, A Guide to the Identification and Natural History of the Sparrows of the United States and Canada.

Additional resources the observer asked to add to his report:

D. Beadle and J. Rising. 2002. Sparrows of the United States and Canada: The Photographic Guide.

D.A. Sibley. 2003. The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America.

J.L. Dunn and J. Alderfer. 2011. National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 6th ed.

P. Pyle. 1997. Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part 1.

Garrett, K.L., J.L. Dunn, and R. Righter. 2000. Call Notes and Winter Distribution in the Fox Sparrow Complex. *Birding* 32:412-417.

Mlodinow, S.G., B.Tweit, and D. Irons. 2012. The Sooty Fox Sparrows of Washington's Puget Trough. *Birding* 44:46-52.

G. Willett. 1942. Common Birds of the Los Angeles County Mountains. Los Angeles County Museum.